Cluster initiative managers – entrepreneurial leadership in flux

Introduction

Innovation is at the top of every nation, and organizations try to keep up in the fierce competitiveness of most industries. Earlier research has stated that relationships and interaction, not individual leadership, is the key to sustained competitiveness in established organizations (Weymes 2002). It implies that intentional interaction is necessary across organizational boarders. Leadership could in other words be understood as executed by any collaborator, who all act outside their main organizational boarders. But with an intention to move a mutual agenda forward (Huxham and Vangen 2000). This collaboration, or distributed leadership is however not self-organized or context independent.

Concentrations of interacting parties of different kinds enhance learning and the collaborative transformation of mutual knowledge into valuable means. The concentrations referred to are classified as cluster contexts, where synergistic effects through collaboration; advantages in economies of scale, social relations and networks and other benefits are enhanced for productive purposes (Porter, 1998; Johannisson & Lindholm Dahlstrand 2009; Sölvell, 2009; Smith et al 2013).

But also the cluster context enhancement is not self-organized. Clusters are often mediated by specific organisations, so called cluster initiatives (Klofsten et al, forthcoming). The cluster initiatives are small intermediary organizations headed by cluster managers. They are established with the purpose of developing activity platforms and services for a variety of actors (Laur et al. 2012). The actors gather based on a mutual interest for achieving individual innovation agendas. This is enabled by the intentionally outlined platforms for a better dialogue between the private and the public sector within the cluster-specific business environment.” (Ketels & Memedovic, 2008), and for fostering new ideas. In the context of cluster initiatives multiple leadership challenges arise. Challenges that can not be related to established leadership theory, that is mainly based on behaviour found in organizational contexts with set boarders, including traditional leadership roles such as information- and decision roles (Mintzberg 1973).

The context of cluster initiatives is differently very often fraught with colliding operational logics, different agendas, and lack of identifiable structures. They build on a substantial portion of voluntariness and distributed power and responsibility, which together challenge present knowledge about leadership. The present managerial concepts are based on the existing and not the emerging. The consequence is that they do not apply to how leadership is pursued among collaborating partners. This paper is therefore focussing on the need for enhanced understanding of the leadership enacted within the context of cluster initiatives. The preliminary results from an ongoing study
of cluster initiative management point to a leadership that is based on the identification and evaluation of potential ideas. A leadership that supports, motivates and facilitates a distributed leadership among the collaborative actors.

**Theoretical framework**

The cluster initiative partners have no clearly defined notions of responsibility and accountability (O’Reilly and Reed, 2011), but are tentatively finding mutual interest and ways of working. Yet, paraphrasing the classical article by Henry Mintzberg: The Manager’s Job -Folklore and Facts, asking cluster managers what they do, they try to articulate their leadership in familiar aspects such as coordinating mutual interest or motivating individuals to take the lead in developing upcoming ideas. Nonetheless, the cluster initiative manager’s job is more about enabling an integrating of network partners, their ideas and interests, to create a mutual co-production of innovation in the context in between organizations (Holmberg & Tyrstrup 2013). That encompasses a leadership to be pursued in a flux of contingencies. More, it implies a leadership in flux, where operations progress by different actors taking leadership responsibility, a so called distributed leadership (Gronn, 2008). Yet as was called for in the concept of distributed leadership needs to be developed to remain a powerful concept for analysis, which is very different from the heroic and individual focus of leadership we know the best. The direction taken here is to focus on the interaction approaches of cluster initiative managers and their interacting parties, coming from very different contexts.

**Methodology**

The empirical illustrations in this paper are derived from a longitudinal study of cluster initiative managers in Sweden, which is still ongoing. All thirteen cluster initiative managers, financed by governmental funding (VINNOVA) were invited in the fall of 2013 to participate in this project. Ten cluster initiatives were interested in participating. The main purpose presented was to support and interpret their leadership approach, but also to map the progress in terms of cluster development and results. The methodology format is mainly based on workshops, as a method for understanding a group’s intentions/understandings down to the individual group member (Shaw 2006). Every workshop is followed up with individual telephone interviews for additional clarifications. Separate interviews are further conducted recurrently to identify the progress of the cluster. The method applied for that is the critical incident technique (Planagan 1954; Kaulio 2003; Roos 2014), which produces a contextual background to analyze the leadership against.

**Results**

The results so far illustrate the without means situation of cluster initiative managers, but also the power in working from a collaborative position. Taking the positive aspect first, the cluster initiative managers are successful in arousing interest among a variety of critical partners for making progress within specific industrial sectors. Yet all these partners mainly have an ad hoc relation to the cluster initiative. A pivotal challenge is therefore to develop a distributed leadership where different partners enroll an ownership and take a leadership responsibility. A leadership challenge that includes attraction of resources that become mutually owned by the collaborative partners. Tentative conclusions point to that mobilizing of collaborative members, controlling of
the agenda, motivating and other related leadership dimension goes all the way through
the cluster initiative manager’s agenda to other collaborative partners taking on the
same responsibilities.